

Carmen is imprisoned for actions carried out in the interests of a free and independent Puerto Rico. Living in Chicago near the Black Panther Party office and witnessing the events that the Chicago Black Panthers experienced helped to develop her political consciousness. After graduating college she began teaching high school and developing a clear awareness of U.S. colonization of her country. She began struggling within the high school to introduce true Puerto Rican culture and history. She also worked with the Iranian Students Association. The members of this organization were active participants in the dethroning of the Shah. She worked against and helped to defeat what was known as Plan 21, Chicago's politically motivated plan for gentrification. Carmen also co-founded and was the president of the Jose De Diego Bilingual Center which was created to preserve the cultural heritage of the Puerto Rican people and to advance the study of its history, literature and culture. She was a founding member of the Ruiz Belvis Educational Center which was created to provide an alternative for students forced to drop out of high school and give them the opportunity to continue their education. Carmen also established committees to monitor and document police brutality as well as helping to form a legal office to inform the public about their legal rights. She also developed classes and programs inside Statesville Penitentiary for Puerto Rican and Latino prisoners to teach their literature and common heritage. Carmen's quantity of work soon changed to qualitative work and she joined the revolutionary clandestine armed forces of the National Liberation (FALN). She was captured in April of 1980 and charged with participating in armed activity against the United States Government and sentenced to 98 years.

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PUERTO RICAN PRISONER OF WAR CARMEN VALENTÍN

THOUGHTS ON THE ANARCHIST BLACK CROSS



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Puerto Rican
Prisoner of War
Carmen Valentin

Thoughts on the Anarchist Black Cross

Neil: Hi this is Neil from New Jersey Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) interviewing Puerto Rican Prisoner of War Carmen Valentin, I'm just going to ask her some questions. Carmen, as a POW who's not an Anarchist, how were you introduced to the ABC and what has the ABC come to mean to you?

Carmen: Okay, I have been incarcerated at the FCI Dublin in California for the last 14 years. Prior to this I was at a state prison in Illinois for 3 years. There are 4 Puerto Rican Prisoners of War with me here and there are three North American Political Prisoners. It was through Marilyn Buck, one of the North American Political Prisoners that I heard about the ABC Federation. This happened around September of 1995 and she was a member of the committee of prisoners of the ABC Federation, and she asked if I wanted to participate in a calendar, a political prisoners calendar, that the ABC Federation was going to publish for the year 1996. So at first I hesitated because up until then I had been kind of closed to working with other groups outside the Puerto Rican movement. But then I said what a great idea, a Political Prisoners calendar, that's definitely something we need, more exposure, because there is definitely a silence that is encircling all of us. So I decided to participate and I wrote to the ABC Federation and I asked them questions about themselves and about their work and about their politics, and they responded immediately. And from that moment on we formed an alliance that has only a promise of a stronger future. Then I immediately was so delighted by the work they were attempting to do, that I told other comrades from our movement, like Dylcia Pagan and then I told Ricardo Jimenez and now they're actively involved.

Neil: All of them are involved now as well.

Carmen: Yes, so that was how I got involved.

Neil: Do you think that it's important for people of different ideologies to support one another in each other's struggles?

Carmen: Yes, however I was going to tell you what the ABC means for us, first. Just generally, I think most of the progressive movement that many of the POWs and Political Prisoners helped to build are dormant somewhat today. However we remain in prison and are like symbols or reminders of a time that change in our generation or in our time was pretty much in fashion and seemed possible, changing the world. But as you know we have been in prison for all these years, and have become abstract symbols of resistance, and I think the ABC Federation is

the little they receive. You will see that their discovery of our existence and our needy situation has reached far and wide because of them. You will see that there is a list of people that need a lot of help, but they have only reached a few prisoners because they do not have as much, as many resources as they would like to have. They need more help to continue with their principle work. And I'm of the belief that if something is good you should support it, make it stronger. And they have gained our trust and our respect so it's easy for us to recommend them and to urge other Anarchists and progressive people to be involved with the work of the ABC Federation. That's it.

Neil: Thank you.

Carmen: You're welcome.

you can work alone during these times is a terrible error, only enemies of progress remain locked and intransigent in their narrow world of differences. The desire to help one another, that desire that which we have and that the ABC Federation has to help us is enough to transcend all the differences. And though I would like to be idealistic and think that everyone has my beliefs, I know that's not true so I try to look at the differences as challenging.

Neil: From our work together we really have the opportunity to learn about one another and our different ideologies and our different political beliefs and have a greater understanding.

Carmen: Oh, I think so. My horizons have been expanded since I've been working with other people; I was kind of closed in and all these years I have been strictly a person immersed in Puerto Rican affairs and Puerto Rican Independence Movement and that was it. I was not... and I find myself much more versed and much more involved in other things and it's a great thing, I find it exciting. But going back to the committee of prisoners, I think that we have common knowledge of the fact that we have one thing clear, and that is that we are incarcerated, we need help and the ABC Federation is willing to help us and we're all together working to figure out how best to do this, so it's a very successful committee.

Neil: Why would you encourage other Anarchists and people who... anyone else who wanted to be involved in supporting Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War to be involved in the Anarchist Black Cross Federation?

Carmen: Just the work alone, if you look at the ABCF and what they produce, that speaks for itself. They also have been able to work successfully with all different kinds of movements, some are Anarchist, some are Communists, some Nationalists, some Muslims, some Move prisoners. They have pulled us together to some degree and this is effective organizing, but the best thing that I always say when I'm about to recommend the ABC Federation is just read they're publication update, The Jersey Anarchist, examine the calendar, Political Prisoner calendar, check out their itinerary of prison visits, their efforts at establishing an international network, the work of the warchest, study their ability to disseminate political information through the table of literature that they carry all over the place, through out the United States. Once you study this, you realize this federation has done so much with

attempting to shed light on our existence and to help us in an organized fashion. By making it public that we are in need of help, they're attempting to organize this concrete help and at the same time attempting to destroy the fallacy that is put out there in the free world. The fallacy that we enjoy tremendous amounts of material support. As a matter of fact if you see one of the updates, you will see that at the top it always has a little proverb that Ojore Lutalo, one of the Anarchist POWs wrote and it summarizes this message very well, it says "any movement that does not support its internees, is a sham movement." It's unfortunate that that has been happening for a long time. However I think the ABC Federation is trying to break through this and trying to take us out of the closet of relics that we have been put in. They're trying to send out a message to people outside so that they know we are alive and kicking, and that we have children that are alive and have basic needs, and we have grandchildren that have basic needs. So when you expose this reality I think it is a great accomplishment and it has to be done, because this myth of heroism that has been created around us and around our names has to be destroyed. This is because we're ordinary people, not to much different from you, from everybody else out there.

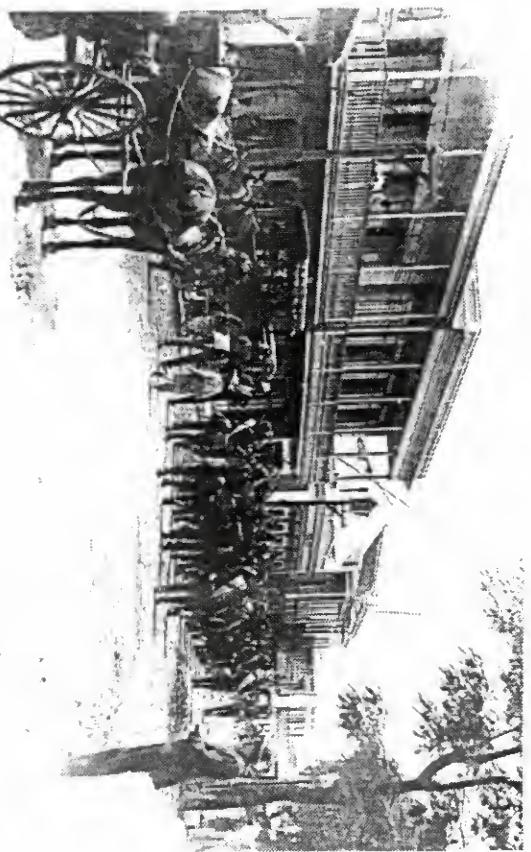
Neil: In a lot of ways we feel the same way, that you are very much like us, which is why we feel supporting you is so important to us. It could be us.

Carmen: Absolutely.

Neil: As the social and progressive movements grow, it will become us. So if we don't build something that's out here, that can concretely offer principle support to you, then there'll be nothing like that for us when some people from the growing progressive movements out here do find themselves in prison.

Carmen: Yes, because, you know, there is a problem with creating mythical figures and it is that you are promoting a myth, exactly that, something that is not real, and I can speak about us, the Puerto Ricans mainly, but I think it applies to everybody else. We become a myth, someone so outside everybody else, a little different, super ordinary human beings. We came out of a concrete reality and only when people begin to recognize the reality from which we evolved, which is their reality, are they then able to assume the responsibility in a meaningful way. I believe progressive people have a responsibility towards all of us. I don't

feel that I am grateful for the existence of the ABC Federation, because gratitude takes us out of the reason why we exist so I just finally believe there's something in existence that is past overdue. We have been in prison a long time, we have not received very much concrete help, the ABC Federation is a legitimate body with a committee of prisoners, they offer people an opportunity to participate, to act under compassion and to contribute to the War Chest and all the other projects the Federation sponsors for the prisoners.



U.S. imperialism invades Puerto Rico

Neil: And to be a meaningful part of their own support.

Carmen: Yes, exactly, and that's so much needed because sometimes many things take place and we are not given that opportunity to give input into what's happening. Another thing that I wanted to mention about to ABC Federation, is that it fulfills

another mission for the prisoners and it is that it creates a bridge and unites us, the prisoners inside. I know that since my involvement with the Federation I feel much closer and aware of the reality of the other POWs and Political Prisoners. There is a more direct and real connection with them. And I feel that we are like a family, we dedicated our lives to struggle, to change, to

Federation, so up until now I have yet to find an occasion when I have differed in principle with anything that is presented from the Anarchists from the ABC Federation. Most of us in the Prisoner's Committee, we're from different movements, have similar ideas and beliefs about what should be done for us in or in relationship to our needs. We agree that solidarity work that's done based on principle does not have to be dictated by one particular ideology such as Communism or Anarchism or Nationalism. I am of the belief that if there is respect, commitment, dedication and common objectives that differences will fade and they won't get in the way of progress. So we the prisoners are in need of help, the federation



Carmen, her son and granddaughter

of Anarchists is willing to help us and willing to do this with great respect and revolutionary principle. We all blend together very well and we do the work that's expected and find very little difficulty in doing it. I think it's political maturity that creates this kind of group and cohesiveness because I think that to believe that

Neil: Okay, a lot of Anarchists who are involved with the ABC; there's a distinction between the ABC and the ABCF, the ABCF is a small group, well a grouping of ABC collectives who join together in a federation, to do collective work. The ABC is a much larger movement, so not all the ABCs are in the ABCF. But some of the people in the non-affiliated ABCs and other prisoner support groups criticize the ABCF for supporting Nationalists and Communists instead of just Anarchists, what would you say to people who would criticize us for that?

Carmen: I'm always perplexed by the enthusiasm of many in criticizing the positive work of some. If people spent the same amount of energy that they spent criticizing and working to create positive solutions we would fare so much better, but unfortunately they don't do that. So I can best summarize my feelings for those that criticize the ABC Federation for supporting Nationalists and Communists, etc. by saying that the ABC Federation is able to keep us in the fore front of memory, to keep the generosity of spirit and the physical courage of all the incarcerated comrades, they try never to pin one against the other or to discriminate against any one of us because of our ideologies. Quite to the contrary, it is their intention to convert our example of resistance into normalcy and to paint a picture of people that are normal and that should be emulated and duplicated. Since the ABC discovered us, and discovered that we have been hidden inside these prisons they have used this discovery as the basis for thought and reflection, and something like this is needed, especially during these times when struggle is at its lowest point and it is not anymore in fashion. So I give a lot of credit to the ABC Federation and it is my recommendation to those that criticize it that they step back, that they observe, that they listen and learn from them. If not, there will come a time when they will find themselves isolated, distrusted and out of tune with the reality of times.

Neil: As you mentioned, the Prisoner's Committee, before. The Prisoner's Committee is a five member body of Political Prisoners, it rotates every year and the Prisoner's votes on all the decisions that the ABCF made. Carmen, you're a current Prisoner's Committee member, has the fact that you're not an Anarchist affected your ability to work so closely with Anarchists?

Carmen: Before I joined the Committee of Prisoners I had already studied the work, the politics, the commitment of the ABC

justice and freedom, and for obvious reasons we're kept apart. But the ABC Federation unites us and I can give you an example. When I got involved with the ABC Federation, at that time I knew the Puerto Rican comrades, some of them had great need of some financial assistance. So when I got involved with the Federation I mentioned it to them and they immediately connected with these people and provided them with some help. So it's quite an important accomplishment, not only are they providing help, they're linking us together and that is another thing that's of tremendous importance for us.

Neil: That sort of leads into ... a couple of years ago I had interviewed an Irish American Political Prisoner, well, this was before he was in prison, and he had mentioned, you had said all the Political Prisoners are sort of like a family, and he had mentioned that there was a golden chain that linked all people who struggled. And that sort of leads into the next question I was going to ask, and that was, do you think it is important that people of different ideologies support one another in their struggles?

Carmen: Yes, absolutely important! I like the way Ojore Lutalo, he's an Anarchist Political Prisoner, and I like a lot of his sayings or proverbs. He says that our enemy is consolidating it's efforts against us, so we have to do the same in turn. I also read an essay by Jail Muntaqim that explains this very clearly and I liked it and it is that the human race is like a painting, and it is framed, and we stay within that frame and never step out to look at the real problem. We just stay inside that frame and pick at each others differences, of color, race, creed, ideology. And if we continue to do this, the differences which make us all more powerful will be used to destroy us. And we see that a lot, we see that happening all the time. And I like this analogy that Jalil makes because it helps us see how narrow-mindedness is what is ruling when we try to exclude other people from other ideologies and we waste a lot of time worrying about what is politically correct. It is not important if one thinks that Communism is not workable or not, or that any other ideology is workable or not. It is not important that we think ourselves more clever than others or vice versa. What I think is important is that we belong to those that take compassion one step further and act it. It is the action that we take on behalf of humanity that weaves us into a common thread on that golden chain of humanity that you just mentioned that Pat Mahoney

talked about. So that golden thread is the one that's going to continue to work towards freedom and keep humanity afloat. So working together is of tremendous importance. As a matter of fact, I wanted to mention something here because I think it's important also, and it is that I have been in prison for 17 years and even though my objective, which was the freedom of my country has not been accomplished I find that we have contributed tremendously already because we hear that the independence movement of Puerto Rico, which has never been in consensus about anything throughout their existence, today they have one point of unity and that is the Prisoners of War. So people of all ideologies and orientations are willing to sit together at one table and discuss strategies for our release, and this is a first. So if we accomplish that, we accomplish a tremendous thing. You see, I think people that begin to work together at one particular issue establish a base or a possibility, there's a possibility that the beginning or future alliances of united work are at least being considered and I think the future of the world depends on the consolidation of all these forces of progressive people. If you take ten Anarchists, ten Communists, ten Nationalists and they're confronting an issue, that united front will be so much more effective than if you just take simply ten Anarchists alone with a politically correct line, or ten Communists alone with a politically correct line. So we have to grow, we have to change, those days of being politically correct are history. As you can see, we, our generation wasted a lot of time in thinking that we were politically correct and you see where the world is at today and where we are at today, so new times, these are definitely new times and they demand consolidation and unity, new openings and acting.



Neil: As non-Anarchist revolutionaries and Prisoners of War, how has the ABCF demonstrated their solidarity to you and how have you demonstrated your solidarity with them?

Carmen: I find that solidarity exists out of necessity and responsibility, so I'll break it down like that. Like in our case, we the prisoners, have a need to be helped in many ways. The ABC Federation is acting responsibly in attempting to meet our needs, that's why I said before, we do not have a sense of gratitude for your existence. I find that our recognition of the success of the ABC Federation expresses our solidarity and appreciation in return, or our respect. Never mind appreciation, because you can get into appreciation and gratitude and that doesn't come into play here. It's easy for us to give credit where credit is due, we feel that finally a vacuum is filled, a gap closed, by the existence of the ABC Federation, their existence is a sign of progress and continuity. Solidarity is an expected part of struggle, I mean if you are captured, we are here today. The next group of people will be you or some other person and they will have to expect the movement at large to support them. So I always say, how do I express my solidarity towards the ABC Federation, I tell everybody that I meet about their wonderful work and what they're attempting to do. Then I also summarize my feelings by saying that I hope you never experience having your hands tied behind your back. But if you do, pray that you find a group like ABC Federation in your path, so that your journey suddenly becomes less exhausting and that you suddenly feel that your hands were released. I do feel like I have one hand outside in freedom by being connected to the ABC Federation and I like that feeling. I like to know that I can depend on some people to do certain things if I'm in need and they do.

